

REMARKS TO THE N.J. STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION REGARDING PROPOSED AMENDMENTS
TO N.J.A.C. 6A:8, STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENT FOR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

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As the superintendent of a small preK-12 district --- ethnically diverse and well-regarded --- I urge you to set a higher standard for high school reform than is represented by the New Jersey version of the American Diploma Project.

Attached to these remarks is my Op-Ed piece that appeared in the Bergen Record on September 4th. It highlights the various considerations that I hope you as trustees will consider before acting on the DOE's proposal. At a minimum, I ask you to return the proposal to the DOE so that it can build a coherent forward-looking plan that is informed by deeper insight about educational needs and possibilities.

To paraphrase Thoreau's words from his famous essay on Civil Disobedience: "I ask for not at once no high school re-design, but at once a better design."

In 2005, I served as one of two school superintendents on the Governor's Task Force on Mathematics Education. As you may recall, that Task Force brought together many different perspectives to focus upon a single question: how to improve measured math achievement among all New Jersey students, especially among those students whose performance stubbornly resisted quick and easy reforms.

My membership on that Task Force introduced me to some of the educational policy players in this state. I met those whose influence -- as it turned out -- was on the rise as well as those whose views and values were about to be supplanted. Because the recommendations offered by that Task Force -- however nuanced and well-reasoned -- were unacceptable to those on the ascent, the Task Force report and its recommendations were suppressed.

That suppression of nuanced and grounded thinking has persisted for three years and brings us to the present moment. As trustees of public education in New Jersey, you have it within your power to ensure that our state's educational policy is not reduced to corporate-boardroom-inspired command and control boilerplate.

Despite ornamental references to 21st Century learning and personalized learning experiences, the DOE's plan relies upon the engine of college prep course-taking and end-of course testing for everyone. 21st Century skills are operationally reduced to a narrow set of scholastic credentials validated by proxy test scores.

The claim that these credentials will secure individual and societal economic wellbeing is unsupported by persuasive evidence. Particularly doubtful is the expansive economic significance attributed to passing an Algebra II end-of-course exam. In fact, the opposite may well be true. As the Princeton economist Allan Blinder writes:

Looking back over the past 25 years, 'stay in school longer' was excellent advice for success in the labor market. But looking forward over the next 25 years, more subtle occupational advice may be needed. 'Prepare yourself for a high-end personal service occupation that is not offshorable' is a more nuanced message than 'stay in school.' But it may prove to be more useful. And many non-offshorable jobs --- such as carpenters, electricians and plumbers -- do not require a college education ... Educators and policy makers need to be thinking now about the kinds of training and skills that will best prepare [our] children for their future working lives. Specifically, it is essential to educate America's youth *for the jobs that will actually be available in America* 20-30 years from now, not for the jobs that will have moved offshore... We need to think long and hard about the types of skills that best prepare people to deliver high end personal services, and how to teach those skills in our elementary and high schools... [T]he central thrust of No Child Left Behind is pushing the nation in exactly the wrong direction. I am all for accountability. But the nation's school system will not build the creative, flexible, people-oriented workforce we will need in the future by drilling kids incessantly with rote preparation for standardized tests in the vain hope that they will perform as memory chips."

"Preparing America's Workforce: Are We Looking in the Rear-View Mirror?"
October, 2006. <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ff0702s.pdf>

Re-forming New Jersey high schools into a funnel for college admissions may well serve the self-interest of university administrators. Their self-interest, however, will not benefit all of our students, nor will it serve our broader economy.

As William Daggett writes in an essay entitled "Jobs and the Skills Gap,"

The academic skills demanded by many entry-level jobs today are at a higher level than the academic skills required for post-secondary education. Some of those skills are not only more rigorous but also *different* from the skills needed for success in postsecondary education. Yet our schools continue to focus on getting students ready for college as the ultimate academic preparation ... The skills needed to do school do not necessarily connect well with the skill requirements of the 21st century workplace.

I have served as a high school teacher or a high school principal in the Northeast, Midwest and Pacific Northwest. Some of those schools have very fancy reputations --- New Trier, New Canaan, and Tenafly for example. I fully understand what academic rigor entails; I am no slouch about educational excellence; and I am no apologist about how much work is needed in even our finest high schools to fulfill the mission of public education. From experience, I tell you flatly that our work will be set backward if you adopt this version of high school reform.

Once again, William Daggett:

[O]ur schools remain deeply entrenched in teaching discrete subjects, while the real world requires the ability to apply interdisciplinary knowledge. Students need to be taught how to access, evaluate and synthesize information ... [They] must be taught how to apply their knowledge to solve real world problems. The best way to do this is by appealing to a student's interests, learning style and aptitudes. Unfortunately, most American schools are not organized for application and contextualized knowledge.....

<http://www.leadered.com/>

The DOE proposals before you effectively are silent in answering the most important question we face: how do we make learning engaging for all students and how do we move the adults who work with adolescents to act on better answers than we now deploy to the first part of this question? I describe these proposals as *effectively* silent because the DOE's answer is not helpful. "Pressing down harder -- upon threat of punishment --- on what won't work" not only begs the question: it makes a beggar of those of us in the schools seeking better results and needing more wisdom from state and national level policy-makers.

True high school re-design would reflect nuanced answers to such essential questions as:

- Why is the level of student engagement in our schools so abysmally low?
- How and in what ways does student performance relate to student and teacher engagement with learning and with each other?
- What does Model Schools research say about the essential components of successful and rapidly improving schools that are absent in underperforming schools?
- How can these essential components be used to accelerate progress in lower performing schools and with lower performing student groups?

Dan Lortie, the great sociologist, wrote that, "Uncertainty is the lot of those who teach."

Because sound policy aims at leveraging better results from better practice, educational policy makers should respect the best features of existing practice, as well as the prevailing contexts of that practice. Insufficient time and energy has been expended to uncover and understand practices which characterize our state's high performing schools. For this reason, less hubris and more humility would go a long way to make policy in this state more authoritative and less authoritarian. As a state board of education, you should not grant too swift a license to those who are too certain about what must be taught and how, while they are simultaneously gripped by too little an understanding about what can and should be learned.